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ABSTRACT

The first year of an ESEA/Title III experimental program to teach beginning reading in Spanish to 300 Mexican-American first graders in Corpus Christi, Texas, was described. While learning to read in Spanish, the children simultaneously learned English through aural-oral approach, with the goal of reading in both languages by the end of grade 2. A control group of 300 children received all instruction in English. They used the McKee Reading for Meaning series beginning with Getting Ready to Read which teaches reading through oral context combined with letter-sound associations for initial consonants. The experimental group received instruction in Spanish and English and used Preparandose Para Leer, an experimental Spanish program taking the same approach as Getting Ready to Read, but using the 14 Spanish consonants. This group began transition to reading in English after they completed the prereading skills in Spanish and were actually reading Spanish stories. Then they read stories in both English and Spanish. The program will continue through grade 2, when testing will be done. Some preliminary observations of the program's value and references are given. (CM)

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ERMAS: Experiment in Reading for Mexican  
American Students

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No discussion of reading for the Spanish-speaking child can  
confine itself entirely to reading methods and materials. What  
has been done to this child exceeds the bounds of pedagogy.

Consider the child who enters school only to find that he is  
in a strange world, forbidden to use his native language. Forced  
into an English-speaking world, he often cannot cope with the  
demands. The implication to him is that his language and his  
customs are inferior to that of the Anglo American.

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Add to this the fact that often his teachers, consciously or unconsciously, write him off: "What can you expect? He has no background." We expect nothing, and the child lives up to our expectations. Even his pre-school language experience is discounted: instead of considering him bilingual, we consider him "illiterate in two languages." Is it any wonder that he drops out of school, first mentally, then physically?

A few survive. But at what price? These reject their native culture and language. They no longer communicate with grandmother, and often not even with mother. Ironically, many of these "successful" children find themselves studying Spanish as a foreign language later in their school careers.

These concerns are neither new nor original. Early in 1967, the Texas Education Agency, under the direction of Dr. W. R. Goodson, began action on the problems. A conference (1) in January brought together professionals of similar concerns from two continents. Seeds were sown and some found fertile soil in Corpus Christi. Germination was rapid in the Spring of 1967, when Dr. Dana Williams, Superintendent of the Corpus Christi Schools, brought people from Massachusetts, Illinois, and Colorado to work with his staff in developing a program for Mexican American children. Out of these planning sessions grew ERMAS (Experiment in Reading for Mexican American Students), a Title III, ESEA project (2).

#### The Purpose of ERMAS

Designers of ERMAS had a major goal in mind: to provide the educational motivation and the social-cultural pride which would

grant true equality and success to Mexican American children. The means suggested was a beginning reading program, in Spanish, which would be taught in a manner consistent with the program to be used for reading in English. Simultaneously, while learning to read in Spanish, the child would be learning English through an aural-oral approach.

What is the theoretical and research foundation for such a program? A basic premise of the total program is the fact that any child, regardless of language background, is more likely to learn to read if he is taught reading skills than he is if he is provided with experiences and vocabulary development while reading is ignored. In fact, to pretend that there must be a choice between reading skills and experiences was looked upon as another of the false dichotomies with which we are often impeded. As a result, the program focuses on the essential reading skills, with the experiential and language activities built in, rather than the reverse where reading skills are delayed while the child develops concepts and vocabulary.

Research is limited, but studies such as those by Modiano (3) and Columbia University (4) suggest that children can learn to read successfully when taught first to read in their native tongue. Besides, we do not expect the Anglo child to begin his reading in material that is outside his listening-speaking vocabulary, so why expect it of the Mexican American child? The task of the beginning reader should be limited to that of converting the printed word into its spoken form which he already recognizes. If he learns to do

this decoding in his native tongue in such a manner that the skills can be transferred to the reading of English, he has made a double accomplishment. (This effort at consistency in learning to read in both Spanish and English appears to be a unique feature of the Corpus Christi project.)

Another theoretical foundation of the project relates to bilingualism. This factor involves both educational and economic considerations: educationally, the child will be more successful if his concept of himself is a good one, i.e., if he has a pride in his native language and culture; economically, there is a great demand for true bilinguals, but the Mexican American who completes his education most often has no facility in his mother tongue.

Finally, there is no research or theoretical debate about the importance of an oral English program to precede reading in English for the non-English speaking child (5, 6).

#### Research Procedures

Goals of ERMAS were converted to the following major hypothesis for testing: can Mexican American children who begin reading in Spanish also learn to read English as well, by the end of second grade, as their peers who began reading only English in first grade?

In the Fall of 1968, six hundred Spanish-surname first-grade children were randomly divided into two equal groups. The control group was given all instruction in English, including reading instruction in English, using the Reading for Meaning series and beginning with Getting Ready to Read (7). Specifically, the technique used provided for establishing letter-sound associations for eighteen consonants and four digraphs through use of key pictures. Then the

children were taught to use oral context and the letter-sound association for the initial consonant of a printed word in order to read that word.

The experimental group was given instruction in both English and Spanish, including initial reading instruction entirely in Spanish, using Preparandose Para Leer (8), an experimental Spanish program taking essentially the same approach as that used in Getting Ready to Read. Again, children were taught to use oral context and letter-sound associations for initial consonants in order to read printed Spanish. Obviously, key words were different from the English program used by control groups. Fourteen consonants plus the digraph ch were taught. Children concluded the prereading skills program with several lessons about the vowels and high frequency (structure) words.

The experimental group began transition to reading in English after they completed the prereading skills in Spanish and were actually reading Spanish stories. At this point, they used specially prepared materials. These transition materials were designed to develop letter-sound associations for consonants not used in Spanish (w, k, h, y, sh, th, wh), to develop new associations for j and v, to illustrate the unreliability of vowels in English, and to provide experience with twelve high frequency words. Obviously, consonants with the same sound value in English as in Spanish were not retaught; in fact, where additional practice was required, the Spanish key picture (key word) was retained.

Following the transition materials, the experimental group began the Reading for Meaning series also. Both groups will continue in this series through second grade, the only difference in treatment

being that experimental groups will also continue library reading and discussion in Spanish. Both experimental and control groups received the same instruction in oral English (9).

At the end of second grade, both groups will be given a standardized (English) reading achievement test. In addition to the two groups mentioned, the reading achievement test will also be given to a second control group of second graders who will be selected randomly from the general population. The purpose of the second control group is to serve as a check on the approach to reading in English, since the reading program used in the Corpus Christi schools is different from that in the ERMAS groups.

#### Teacher Training

Teacher understanding is fundamental to the success of any program. While the Corpus Christi schools are fortunate in having a number of excellent bilingual teachers, the reading techniques proposed were new to them. Hence, a number of in-service activities were developed.

A summer workshop in 1967 included both experimental and control teachers. At this time, rationale of the program and specific techniques were presented. During the 1967-68 school year, five teachers who had participated in the preliminary workshop used Reading for Meaning with their children so they would become familiar with the techniques and could serve as demonstration teachers for others who were to be in ERMAS.

June of 1968 saw another workshop, where again both experimental and control teachers participated. At this time, model lessons from

Preparandose Para Leer were ready, so they could be reviewed in detail with experimental teachers while control teachers specifically reviewed lessons in Getting Ready to Read.

Through the 1968-69 school year, the first year for ERMAS, Mrs. Thorn served as full-time consultant to the twenty-four teachers. In addition, Mrs. Louise Greenwood, Houghton Mifflin Consultant, was on call for both experimental and control teachers. A number of visits were made also by Mr. William Spaulding and Dr. Hillerich, co-authors of the Spanish reading program. The intensive supervision and consultation are essential in a program such as this, where new materials are being developed. Constant checking and revision are required, since even the best of thoughts are worthless if they don't work with children.

#### Some Observations

ERMAS has another year to go before results are in. Meanwhile, we are encouraged by what we see.

To begin with, these children are not "illiterate in two languages." They have lived for five or six years; they have had experiences; they have spoken and been spoken to; they have enthusiasm for what they understand and enjoy. Teachers were amazed at the amount of Spanish these children do have, despite the years of pressure to "speak English." And where there were language gaps, the program assisted in the development of language fluency, since it was designed to provide for oral activity prior to and during the reading program.

The approach to reading in English is McKee's technique (10) of using context and consonants, ignoring vowels at the beginning stage. To some, this technique might be considered a handicap in learning to read in Spanish, since, in the Spanish, the vowels are consistent in their sound representation. However, the accomplishment of this method, with its concomitant emphasis on meaning, seems worth the effort, especially since, in Spanish-speaking countries, the claim is frequently made that children learn to read quickly but they don't understand what they read. In other words, it is easy--in Spanish--to sound out words, letter-by-letter; it is easy to make all the right noises for the squiggles on a page, but this is not the point of reading. Hence, we believe the approach used in Corpus Christi, with its emphasis on the use of context and only as many consonant letter-sound associations as needed, will produce better readers of Spanish as well as better readers of English.

Parental response has been especially interesting. Initially there was concern about reaction from the parents because Spanish was being used with their children. These parents had learned the economic disadvantage of poor English, and so they reinforced the typical educational position of discouraging use of the Spanish language in favor of using English. Now the schools were reversing themselves. Yes, the oral English program developed in Corpus Christi was continuing, but instruction was taking place in Spanish. From their initial skepticism, however, parent reaction came in the form of strong approval, especially when first grade children came home with Spanish stories

which they could read to grandmother and to younger brothers and sisters.

One of the most exciting and unforgettable experiences for some of us in the program was the day we saw a group of children introduced to their first reading book in Spanish. The nature of Prenarandose Para Leer is such that all prereading skills have been taught, including certain high frequency words, before children enter a "reader." Upon completion of Prenarandose Para Leer, the plan was to have the children go directly to the reading of several small booklets of stories. Could they? Could children move from exercise materials to the application of skills in a true reading situation? Could they go from complete teacher direction to semi-independence? As a number of us watched, the teacher distributed the booklets, introduced several words in order to review the skill children were expected to apply, and then suggested that these children read the story.

About forty-five seconds of deafening silence followed, as children looked at the teacher, at the unfamiliar booklet, and at each other. Then, silently, they read! They read, enjoyed, and talked about the story. The pride of these youngsters was no greater than that of their teacher and observers, all of whom had witnessed a momentous step in the lives of these children and could envision this same success for many other first graders like them.

Any new program must face some difficulties. ERMAS has been no exception, but the problems have certainly not been disheartening. The greatest handicap has been in the area of materials. Teachers of

experimental classes were not able to begin in September as planned because Preparandose Para Leer was not ready. As they moved along in the program, again they caught up to available lessons and had to lose time. When they were ready for reading in Spanish, the problem of appropriate translation of original story material was a concern. At the independent level, the availability of good, easy-to-read library books in Spanish presented some difficulties. And, at the transition stage, once more teachers and children caught up with the production of materials.

In contrast to the delays faced by the experimental groups, control groups began their program in September and were able to progress normally through the year. Despite these delays, however, experimental groups are reading in Spanish and began reading in English by about April of first grade.

Another handicap to the experimental children may exist in the minds of some. We know that experience in reading--time to read--is a factor in the development of reading skill: children learn to read by reading. Not only did control groups get started earlier, while experimental groups were learning to read in Spanish, but--now that both are reading in English--some of the time allotted to reading for the experimental groups is "stolen" from English reading and devoted to reading in Spanish. The Spanish must be continued, but will it be at the expense of learning to read in English? We doubt it. We believe that the start in Spanish is well worth the time sacrificed, but this is a question which must still be resolved.

The transition from Spanish to English by experimental groups appeared to be even more natural than anticipated. Teachers reported children picking up materials in English and applying the skills they had learned in Spanish to read the English. And why not? From the reading instruction in Spanish, children knew what the reading task consisted of; they knew how to use context and had established letter-sound associations for consonants, two-thirds of which represent the same sound in English; and they had learned to enjoy reading.

Test results must be considered in the evaluation of any program. While these are not in, subjective evaluations by participants and by the Texas Education Agency have been positive enough that the study will not only be continued in second grade, but it will be replicated with a larger and more tightly controlled group in first grade next year.

Despite the initial handicaps of a new program, and certainly because of a dedicated staff of hard-working teachers and administrators in both experimental and control groups, we have seen Mexican American children learn to read in their native tongue and apply their skills to the reading of English. We have seen them do these things with a pleasure and enthusiasm long overdue. Can we, now, nurture this seed into a full flowering of that personal and cultural pride which leads to happy and productive adulthood? This is the challenge!

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